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The Political Economy of Work Security and Flexibility. Italy in comparative perspective. Policy Press, Cambridge, 2012, 190pp. ISBN 9781847429070

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Since the crisis of the Fordist ‘Golden Age’ with its corollaries of stable, full-time (male) employment and full-welfare entitlements, flexibility has become a sort of ‘magic word’ to tackle Eurosclerosis, that is, the low growth and high unemployment disease of European countries. In recent decades, amid the increasing social vulnerability of many workers and families within a scenario of economic crisis and welfare retrenchments, the ‘shibboleth’ of flexibility has started to be accompanied by that of security. Flexicurity, indeed, has become a crucial element of the Employment Guidelines and the European Employment Strategy as a whole.

The book *The Political Economy of Work Security and Flexibility*, written by Fabio Berton, Matteo Richiardi and Stefano Sacchi, offers an excellent analysis of current debate on flexicurity and its impact on workers’ labour market conditions and careers. It does so in three distinctive ways. First, it focuses on Italy, a quite understudied case in the ‘Varieties of Capitalism’ literature, in comparison with Germany, Spain and Japan. As the authors argue, this comparison is interesting

because these are all ‘Bismarckian countries’, that is, countries where social insurance is the main principle and mode of regulating social protection, and because in recent decades they have all witnessed a spread of non standard work, albeit to different extents.

Second, unlike most previous work on the link between flexibility and security, which has been predominantly conceptual and speculative, this book uses unique Italian work history data (drawn from the Italian Social Security Administration) to make an empirically-grounded contribution not only at the macro institutional level but also, and mainly, at the micro workers’ level. Third, Berton and colleagues propose a multidimensional conceptualisation and operationalisation of workers’ security. Indeed, building on the flexicurity debate, well described in Chapter Two, they develop a definition of security as “the capacity of an individual to stabilise his/her material life chances through labour market participation, that is, to maintain an adequate standard of living by participating in the labour market or accessing social benefits connected to labour market participation”. This definition at workers’ level is then articulated into three dimensions: employment security, wage security, and social security. After a description, in Chapter Three, of the Italian institutional scenario from a comparative perspective, the book conducts – in separate in-depth chapters – empirical analyses of each of these three dimensions. Chapter Seven then proposes a synthetic monetary measure whereby resources from the labour market and the social protection system are jointly considered.

The findings show that workers on fixed-term contracts are more often exposed to job-to-job transitions and to spells in non-employment. Moreover, their higher employment insecurity often goes in tandem with higher wage and social insecurity. Discontinuity in employment, indeed, is not offset either by better remunerations or

by equal access to income maintenance schemes. This results in what Berton, Richiardi and Sacchi aptly call the ‘flex-insecurity’ syndrome, which applies to all the Bismarckian countries analysed but particularly to Italy and Spain. Mediterranean countries have indeed pursued labour market adjustments through a ‘partial and targeted deregulation’ which has almost exclusively concerned new entrants in the labour market without substantial changes to the insurance logic of their protection systems; a logic that clearly penalises non-standard labour market participation. As the authors conclude, if the aim of labour market reforms is not just the production of more jobs but a better quality of life, actions must change direction by reversing ‘the great risk shift’ from private enterprises to individual workers, states and taxpayers. To this end, the policy solutions cannot simply consist in new or adjusted employment regulations with the introduction of ‘single contracts’. They must comprise a new and clear set of rights such as a ‘termination payment’ for atypical employees, universal coverage by collective bargaining, and universal income maintenance schemes.

By drawing on a new under-explored dataset, the book thus confirms that in Bismarckian contexts like that of Italy, where any serious recalibration of social protection systems has been blocked, deregulation is not the first best solution as claimed in many public discourses; rather, it generates precariousness and inequality. In contexts with still strong gendered patterns in the labour market, but also in the allocation of family responsibilities and in work-family reconciliation policies, risks of precariousness are not the same for men and women. Nor are they the same across classes. In a familialist regime, class (own, of the partner, of the family of origin) importantly affects the extent and way in which entry into unstable positions transforms into entrapment. This is the only criticism that I would make of this book: its insufficient attention to class and gender cleavages. Yet this does not reduce its

appeal. By using a clear language and structure, and offering an excellent overview of the flexicurity debate with solid empirical evidence on workers' (in)security along multiple dimensions, this book is of indubitable value for academics, students and policy makers.